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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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A-ONE #1136   09/04/09

~ Web Hoax Case Dismissed ~ People Are Talking!   ~ ACEC 2009 Swap Meet!
~ Buying Facebook Friends ~ Word Sells on Appeal! ~ Oz Loses Web Link!
~ Buy Friends, Risk Ban! ~ Web's Prime Use: 11 pm ~ Opera 10 Released!

~ Hot Coffee Suit Cooled! ~ Got A Dream, Use Web! ~ Xbox 360 Is Worst!

                    -* Internet Turns 40 - Mid-life *-
                  -* Traffic Knocks Out Gmail Servers! *-
                -* Internet Addiction Center Opens in the US! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard   "Saying it like it is!"
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It seems like only yesterday that, while driving by the neighborhood
elementary school, the kids were playing outside during recess. A few days
later, the school closed for the summer. This week, I saw the first sign
of autumn - a bright yellow school bus! What happened to the summer? In
a few days, the unofficial end of the summer will hit us - Labor Day. I
can't believe that the summer is almost over; I'm still waiting for it to
start!

So, like many of you will likely do, I'm going to prepare for the last
[unofficial] summer blast, with some barbecuing and cold beers, I'll let
you get to this issue, and then start your long weekend holiday celebration!

Until next time...

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->A-ONE User Group Notes! - Meetings, Shows, and Info!
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              ACEC 2009 VINTAGE COMPUTER AND VIDEO GAME SWAP MEET

                        GREAT NEWS ATARI FANS!!!

The Atari Computer Enthusiasts of Columbus will be holding the annual
vintage computer and video game swap meet on Saturday September 12th 2009.
It will be held at the same place as last year. As you might notice, we
have a new name. This year we are going to include all vintage and classic
computers and video games, systems, accessories, games, and software.

Oakland Park Community Building
980 Lenore Ave.
Columbus, Oh.

Right now the time for the swap meet is from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Admission is FREE! FREE! FREE!

That is right, it is free for both vendors and shoppers! Vendors, please contact us to reserve tables. As it will be first come first serve. We may have to limit the number of tables for each vendor. We have a new feature this year that will allow dealers to pick out what particular tables they want. Please check out our web site for further information and updates.

http://www.angelfire.com/oh4/acec/acec.html

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. I'm going to keep it short and sweet this week... haven't even looked at what messages there may be on the UseNet this week... things have just kind of ballooned around me this week.

I just don't know where this past week has gone... it just flew by. I must be getting old... it's the same thing that's happened with this summer. Did we actually HAVE a summer? I kept waiting for it to hit, but it never really did, at least not here in the northeast. And now we're staring down the barrel of Labor Day. The day that, unofficially, at least, signals the end of summer. I remember the unofficial BEGINNING of summer, but the rest is a nondescript blur. No real highs here in the northeast, a few lows, and a LOT of rain!

Another thing that makes the season seem to fly by is that I've been watching the political scene closely... what with this Health Care Insurance Reform thing and all the talk of bluedogs and obstruction and death panels and idiots bringing guns to where the president is going to be speaking.

Most of it still doesn't make a lot of sense to me. I mean, ALL of the stuff I hear coming out of the republican'ts is garbage. I don't mean just that I don't agree with it, I mean that they're just plain wrong!

Really, guys, the work-in-progress is available online. We should ALL be downloading it and reading it. It concerns US. Personally, I like the idea of a 'public option' where the government supplies insurance coverage. I think that we need something like that to get the insurance companies to play along. The fact that THEY don't want it is proof enough to me that it's worth looking at.

And to those who say that it'll hobble the insurance companies and put them out of business, I say... 'too bad'. If the insurance companies played a fair game on an even playing field, it'd be different. But while the cost of health care (actually receiving care) has gone up by about 25%, the cost of health care insurance has gone up by more than 100%. And no one has offered a reason for that. It seems that it's all for making their stock offerings look better to shareholders, making themselves look better to larger corporations considering buying them out, for funding "Defeat Obama-Care" rallies and the huge sums being paid out on K Street to lobbyists to defeat the legislation before it even gets off the ground.

But if you still believe that having a public option would put the insurance companies at a disadvantage, let me ask you this: Did the TVA put construction companies at a disadvantage? Are bookstores afraid of public libraries? Did radio destroy the record industry? No. In each case, the industry found a way to coexist and even thrive.

But now we've got companies wanting it written into law that they're GUARANTEED a 30% return on their payouts. In other words, insurance companies now want the government to mandate that they HAVE to make $1.35 for every $1.00 that they pay out. Gambling casinos are limited to 20%. But I guess in a corporate culture where you're supposed to expect a bonus regardless of whether or not you do a good job, and want to spend millions of dollars a week on lobbying against legislation and millions more making it look like protest rallies are 'grass roots' when they're actually packed with your employees, you've got to be kind of 'creative' when it comes to raising money, huh?

And these idiots who thought it'd be cool to bring a gun to where the president is speaking... what's up with that? Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know, you've got the Second Amendment on your side. Well, I've got the FIRST Amendment on MY side, and you don't see me bringing a printing press to a town hall meeting. Use some common sense.

But that one example is just the tip of the iceberg. Maybe it's this 'information age' we live in that's warping us. The internet and cellphones and all the rest make it easy for us to be instantly heard. Or do they? It seems to me that the ones doing most of the talking are doing almost none of the listening. Facts have become second to being heard, no matter what gibberish you decide to spout. Look at the people out there steadfastly insisting that the health care plans 'call for' death panels. Chuck Grassley, that weasel... he's one of the ones complaining that this end-of-life counseling will lead to killing granny. The funny thing is that the last bill Chucky himself introduced also included end-of-life counseling... If I remember correctly, it was legislation for veterans and VA hospitals.

So if the majority of the anti-reform stuff out there is bunk (and it is), the question is (or should be) WHY are these legislators and corporations using it?

The answer, for legislators, anyway, seems to be that the republican'ts are just so flummoxed that they're no longer in power that they'll do anything to get it back... anything to stop Obama dead in his tracks. I don't know that Ginny Foxx and Michele Bachman would care either way... they both seem like wingnuts just waiting for something to spin on (sorry for the image, there, guys), but the rest just seem intent on stopping the bill because it's Obama's.

I STILL think that, until the bill gets through congress, all senators and congressmen/women should be stripped of their government-sponsored health insurance. I mean, government-sponsored things are bad, right?

Which senator was it that replied to a woman who said she wanted the public option by saying, "Tell me ONE government program that works!"

I didn't get to hear the woman's reply, but if it were me, I would probably have said something like, "Ummm... The U.S. Forest Service? The U.S. Mint? The NSA, FBI, Secret Service, National Archives, NASA, the Library of Congress, OSHA, NOAA, the Nuclear Regulatory Agency, the

National Guard (when they've got a decent leader)? Medicare, Medicaid?
Social Security? The biggest, most dysfunctional thing set up by the
government right now, sir, seems to be the United States Congress!"

Yeah, I don't get invited to those things often anymore. [grin]

And I don't want you to think that I'm only happy with the minority party
either. The democrats need to... excuse the expression... grow a set and
learn how to use them. The legislator right now that seems to have the
largest 'pair' is Maxine Waters. If EVERY senator and congressman/woman
had her fortitude, we'd be doing okay. I'm not saying they all have to
have the same opinions, but we need people who can see beyond the next
election and stand up and do what needs to be done instead of simply
opposing something because it'll hurt the president.

On that note, I'm going to leave you to go party and celebrate the end of
summer. In the meantime, please party responsibly. Don't drink and drive,
for instance. The life you save may be MINE. [chuckle]

See ya again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen
to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Internet Addiction Center Opens in U.S.!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""   Take-Two Cools 'Hot Coffee' Suit!
                                     Xbox 360 'Least Reliable'!
                                     And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News   - The Latest Gaming News!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

                    Internet Addiction Center Opens in US

Ben Alexander spent nearly every waking minute playing the video game
"World of Warcraft." As a result, he flunked out of the University of Iowa.

Alexander, 19, needed help to break an addiction he calls as destructive
as alcohol or drugs. He found it in this suburb of high-tech Seattle,
where what claims to be the first residential treatment center for
Internet addiction in the United States just opened its doors.

The center, called ReSTART, is somewhat ironically located near Redmond,
headquarters of Microsoft and a world center of the computer industry.
It opened in July and for $14,000 offers a 45-day program intended to

help people wean themselves from pathological computer use, which can include obsessive use of video games, texting, Facebook, eBay, Twitter and any other time-killers brought courtesy of technology.

"We've been doing this for years on an outpatient basis," said Hilarie Cash, a therapist and executive director of the center. "Up until now, we had no place to send them."

Internet addiction is not recognized as a separate disorder by the American Psychiatric Association, and treatment is not generally covered by insurance. But there are many such treatment centers in China, South Korea and Taiwan – where Internet addiction is taken very seriously – and many psychiatric experts say it is clear that Internet addiction is real and harmful.

The five-acre center in Fall City, about 30 miles east of Seattle, can handle up to six patients at a time. Alexander is so far the only patient of the program, which uses a cold turkey approach. He spends his days in counseling and psychotherapy sessions, doing household chores, working on the grounds, going on outings, exercising and baking a mean batch of ginger cookies.

Whether such programs work in the long run remains to be seen. For one thing, the Internet is so pervasive that it can be nearly impossible to resist, akin to placing an alcoholic in a bar, Cash said.

The effects of addiction are no joke. They range from loss of a job or marriage to car accidents for those who can't stop texting while driving. Some people have died after playing video games for days without a break, generally stemming from a blood clot associated with being sedentary.

Psychotherapist Cosette Dawna Rae has owned the bucolic retreat center since 1994, and was searching for a new use for it when she hooked up with Cash. They decided to avoid treating people addicted to Internet sex, in part because she lives in the center with her family.

According to Dr. Kimberly Young of the Center for Internet Addiction Recovery in Bradford, Pa., addiction warning signs are being preoccupied with thoughts of the Internet; using it longer than intended, and for increasing amounts of time; repeatedly making unsuccessful efforts to control use; jeopardizing relationships, school or work to spend time online; lying to cover the extent of Internet use; using the Internet to escape problems or feelings of depression; physical changes to weight, headaches or carpal tunnel syndrome.

Exactly how to respond is being debated.

For instance, Internet addiction can be a symptom of other mental illness, such as depression, or conditions like autism, experts say.

"From what we know, many so-called 'Internet addicts' are folks who have severe depression, anxiety disorders, or social phobic symptoms that make it hard for them to live a full, balanced life and deal face-to-face with other people," said Dr. Ronald Pies, professor of psychiatry at SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, N.Y.

"It may be that unless we treat their underlying problems, some new form of 'addiction' will pop up down the line," Pies said.

There is debate about whether to include Internet addiction as a separate illness in the next edition of the "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders," due in 2012, which determines which mental illnesses get covered by insurance.

Pies and Dr. Jerald Block, of Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland, said there is not enough research yet to justify that.

"Among psychiatrists there is general recognition that many patients have difficulty controlling their impulses to chat online, or play computer games or watch porn," Block said. "The debate is how to classify that."

Cash, co-author of the book "Video Games & Your Kids," first started dealing with Internet addiction in 1994, with a patient who was so consumed by video games that he had lost his marriage and two jobs.

Internet addicts miss out on real conversations and real human development, often see their hygiene, their home and relationships deteriorate, don't eat or sleep properly and don't get enough exercise, Rae said.

Alexander is a tall, quiet young man who always got good grades and hopes to become a biologist.

He started playing "World of Warcraft," a hugely popular online multiplayer role playing game, about a year ago, and got sucked right in.

"At first it was a couple of hours a day," he said. "By midway through the first semester, I was playing 16 or 17 hours a day.

"School wasn't interesting," he said. "It was an easy way to socialize and meet people."

It was also an easy way to flunk out.

Alexander dropped out in the second semester and went to a traditional substance abuse program, which was not a good fit. He graduated from a 10-week outdoors-based program in southern Utah, but felt he still had little control over his gaming.

So he sought out a specialized program and arrived in Fall City in July. He thinks it was a good choice.

"I don't think I'll go back to 'World of Warcraft' anytime soon," Alexander said.

Take-Two Cools 'Hot Coffee' Suit With $20 Million

How much for some hot coffee? How about $20 million?

That's the amount Take-Two Interactive has agreed to shell out to settle a class-action lawsuit over a hidden sex scene within its popular Grand Theft Auto video game.

Under the deal, the class action will be dismissed in exchange for a payment of $20,115,000. Of that total, $15.2 million will be paid by

Take-Two's insurance carriers and $4.915 million will be handled by Take-Two.

"We are pleased to have reached this settlement, which represents another important step forward for the company," said Strauss Zelnick, chairman of Take-Two, said in a statement.

This deal relates to a 2006 securities class-action lawsuit, not the 2005 consumer class-action suit.

In that case, an 85-year-old grandmother filed a class-action lawsuit in 2005 after she purchased Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas for her 14-year-old grandson. She later discovered that it included a hidden sex scene known as "hot coffee."

The 2005 Windows release of GTA:SA included a mod that allowed players to enter the main character's bedroom and control his actions while he had sex with his various girlfriends. Initially, there was no nudity involved, but crafty programmers soon figured out how to disrobe the women.

The parties reached an initial settlement agreement in November 2007 that provided payouts between $5 and $35. A settlement Web site was set up in January 2008, but later that year, a judge ruled that the class-action participants could not be lumped into one class because they were from different states with different laws on the issue.

Tuesday's settlement is subject to final approval by the court.

Xbox 360 'Least Reliable' Console

A new study on game console reliability confirms the popular attitude that Microsoft's Xbox 360 is the least reliable of the current crop of set top systems. According to SquareTrade, Nintendo's Wii is nine times more reliable than Microsoft's Xbox, and four times more than Sony's PlayStation 3. The study scrutinized failure rates for over 16,000 new game consoles covered by its standalone supplementary insurance plans.

In the first two years of ownership, SquareTrade found that 2.7 percent of Wii owners reported a system failure, compared with 23.7 percent of Xbox 360 owners and 10 percent of PS3 owners. Slightly more than half of all Xbox 360 failures were "red ring of death" related, while the remaining 11.7% were "other" failures. The good news for Xbox 360 owners? RROD failures appear to (finally) be in decline in 2009.

There's a caveat: SquareTrade says it believes Microsoft's warranty policy (an excellent, commendably responsible policy, in my opinion) "may result in an underreporting of failures by Xbox 360 owners to SquareTrade, relative to the other consoles."

/Because the RROD problem is so widely known to be covered by Microsoft's warranty, we believe that more customers bypass SquareTrade and reported failures directly to the Microsoft. In a survey of SquareTrade customers with Xbox 360s conducted by email, SquareTrade found that over half of our customers who experienced a RROD error reported their problem directly to Microsoft without contacting SquareTrade. Email survey respondents tend to be a self-selecting group, so the data should be used directionally rather than definitively,

particularly because we did not survey PS3 and Wii owners with the same question. *With that caveat in mind, applying the survey data to the analysis shows that the Xbox 360 failure rate could be as high as 35%.* /

Update: A sharp-eyed reader correctly points out that SquareTrade seems to have inadvertently switched its Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 numbers in the report's Figure 3. While this doesn't affect the failure rate data, which they gathered independent of Nielsen, it does alter the per-day failure rate percentiles slightly.

Fiddling with Nielsen's GamePlay numbers, SquareTrade's "corrected" numbers show the Xbox 360 beating both the PS3 and Wii for minutes used per month at 19.85 hours - slightly ahead of the PS3's 17.55, and more than double the Wii's 8.6.

Given those numbers, the Xbox 360's chance of failure per day is 1.19 percent (23.7% failure rate divided by 19.9 days used per month), compared with 0.57 percent for the PS3 (10.0% failure rate divided by 17.6 days used per month) and just 0.31 percent for the Wii.

I've had three Xbox 360 failures, all RROD-related. The last fizzle happened over two years ago. My current workhorse is an original 2005 model, probably refurbished. Without invoking my press credentials, I've been able to get all three systems repaired--pickup to return delivery--in less than a week's time. My experience has thus been pretty good. I've heard from others who can't claim as much.

Who's SquareTrade? A Better Business Bureau accredited warranty seller, who presumably have a vested interest in gauging their coverage and claim risk. They sell three-year warranties on electronic items purchased through retailers or off auction, new or refurbished. Curiously, their insurance premiums are identical per game system: $45, for instance, whether you're pricing a brand new $300 Xbox 360, or a Nintendo Wii intentionally overpriced at same. Premiums derive from coverage range, in other words, and don't seem indexed off reliability projections.

We reported on SquareTrade's initial survey back in February 2008. At that point, the numbers suggested retailer estimates of the Xbox 360's "33 percent failure rates" due to RROD were high.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Judge Finalizes Dismissal of Web Hoax Charges

A judge has finalized his decision to throw out convictions of a Missouri mother for her role in an Internet hoax directed at a 13-year-old neighbor girl who committed suicide.

U.S. District Judge George Wu said in his written ruling that the case was never a legal test of crimes involving "cyberbullying."

Prosecutors, who adopted that terminology early on, brought charges against Lori Drew under the Federal Computer Fraud and Abuse Statute which does not involve cyberbullying, the judge said.

Wu acquitted Drew of misdemeanor counts of accessing computers without authorization last month but stressed the ruling was tentative until he issued it in writing.

Drew's attorney, Dean Steward, believes Wu's ruling in effect strikes down a portion of the computer fraud act.

"He's pretty much found that portions of it are unconstitutional," said Steward, who expects Department of Justice attorneys to go back to Congress for a clarification.

Thom Mrozek, spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Los Angeles, said no decision had been made yet about a possble appeal.

Prosecutors say Drew sought to humiliate Megan Meier by helping create a fictitious teen boy on the MySpace social networking site and sending flirtatious messages to the girl in his name.

The fake boy then dumped Megan in a message saying the world would be better without her. Megan hanged herself a short time later, in October 2006, in the St. Louis suburb of Dardenne Prairie, Mo.

Drew was not directly charged with causing Megan's death. Instead, prosecutors indicted her under the computer fraud act, which in the past has been used in hacking and trademark theft cases.

Wu's 32-page ruling, filed late Friday, cited vagueness of the statute and the chance that innocent users of the Internet could become subject to criminal charges if Drew's conviction was allowed to stand.

He gave examples of people who could be liable for violating MySpace rules online including "the lonely-heart who submits intentionally inaccurate data about his or her age, height and/or physical appearance," or "the exasperated parent who sends out a group message to neighborhood friends entreating them to purchase his or her daughter's Girl Scout cookies," a violation of rules against advertising or soliciting sales.

Much attention was paid to Drew's case, primarily because it was billed as the nation's first cyberbullying trial. The trial was held in Los Angeles because the servers of the News Corp.-owned social networking site are in the area.

Court: Microsoft OK To Sell Word During Appeal

The U.S. Appeals Court for the Federal Circuit says Microsoft Corp. can keep selling its Word desktop software as it appeals an unfavorable patent ruling.

In May, a Texas district court said some versions of Microsoft's word

processing software infringe on a Canadian technology company's patent. The dispute is over the way Word 2003 and Word 2007 let users customize document encoding.

The Texas judge had ordered Microsoft to pay Toronto-based i4i LLP $290 million and stop selling infringing versions of Word by the middle of October.

Redmond-based Microsoft has appealed the ruling and is set to present arguments on Sept. 23.

Millions in Australia Lose International Internet Link

Australia's major Internet provider Telstra said it lost contact with the rest of the world Thursday when its international gateway crashed, crippling its fixed, mobile and wireless connections.

Millions of customers were for an hour unable to access internationally-hosted sites or local sites with international content, sparking mass frustration.

"Because of an issue with our international gateway, it couldn't find the domain names of websites, so that meant people couldn't access the net if it was an international site or one with international content," a Telstra spokesman told the AAP newswire.

The connection was rebooted and the problem rectified within an hour, but many mobile phone and computer users vented their ire online.

Formerly state-owned, Telstra dominates Australia's telecommunications industry, with millions of Internet and mobile phone customers and the country's largest cable network.

It last month posted a 10.3 percent rise in annual net profit on strong mobile and broadband revenues.

Telstra said it was "engaging constructively" with the government after being invited in April to take part in its 30 billion US dollar plan to build a national broadband network.

Not Enough Facebook Friends? Buy Them

Who says you can't buy friends? An Australian online marketing company is selling friends and fans to Facebook members after offering a similar service to Twitter users.

Advertising, marketing and promoting company uSocial (http://usocial.net) said it was targeting social networking sites because of their huge advertising potential.

"Facebook is an extremely effective marketing tool," Leon Hill, uSocial CEO, said in a statement.

"The simple fact is that with a large following on Facebook, you have an

instant and targeted group of people you can contact and promote whatever it is you want to promote," he added.

"The only problem is that it can be extremely difficult to achieve such a following, which is where we come in.

The company offers packages for Facebook, the world's number one social networking site, that start at 1,000 friends up to 10,000 friends at costs ranging from $177 to $1,167.

"All we do is send them a welcome message or friend request from the client. If they decide to go ahead and add that person as a friend or a fan then they will; if not, then they won't," Hill told Australian media.

Facebook is now the world's fourth-most visited website.

The company, which counts venture capitalist Peter Thiel, Accel Partners, Microsoft Corp and Russian Internet investment firm Digital Sky Technologies among its investors, has more than 250 million registered users.

But uSocial's packages are not without controversy.

According to some Australian websites, Twitter tried to shut uSocial down, accusing it of spamming members, while the Los Angeles Times reported that Digg.com, a website where people vote for their top news stories or websites, has also tried to shut down uSocial because it sells votes.

Australian Businessman Dismisses Facebook Threats

An Australian businessman accused of selling "friends" from the social networking site Facebook hit back Friday, saying it would be "very difficult" to stop him.

Facebook warned Thursday that members who bought information from the Australian online marketing company uSocial.net could be banned from the site.

Leon Hill, 24, who founded and owns uSocial.net, agreed that his customers could be breaching Facebook's terms of service – but added that Facebook was almost powerless to stop him.

He said Facebook would be "well within their rights" to ban its members who accepted uSocial.net's offer but that it "would be almost impossible to track what we're doing."

Hill's Brisbane-based firm this week angered Facebook by offering to sell a user 1,000 friends for 177 US dollars and 5,000 friends – the limit imposed by Facebook on a standard profile account – for 654 dollars.

Facebook "fan" pages have no limits and uSocial.net said it could supply 1,000 Facebook fans for 177 dollars and 10,000 fans for 1,167 dollars.

Likening his service to a dating agency, Hill said his company manually scrolled through Facebook's millions of pages for users who had listed

an interest in or already had links to a particular client's industry.

For example, he said they trawled Facebook on behalf of a dealer in performance car parts to find people with an interest in the automotive industry, who were then sent a friend request or fan suggestion.

"We don't manipulate accounts at all," he said. "We are targeting people for our clients but at the end of the day it's all up to the end user," he said.

Hill said his company did the same thing with microblogging site Twitter, which he said had tried unsuccessfully to stop its members using uSocial.net.

"In the end the thing is that I'm not actually ever doing anything against the terms of service - it's the actual users who purchases my services (who is)," he said.

"Unless they actually say anything, unless they make it known to Facebook or Twitter that they've actually bought my services, there's absolutely nothing they (Facebook or Twitter) can do."

Opera Launches New Internet Browser

Norway's Opera Software released on Tuesday a new version of its browser, Opera 10, promising faster downloads, new design and new features.

Opera battles for the spot of third-largest browser maker with Google's Chrome and Apple's Safari, but is far behind Microsoft and Mozilla Foundation.

Opera said the new browser is significantly faster on resource-intensive pages such as Gmail and Facebook, and adds features like full thumbnails of all open tabs.

Opera said its Turbo feature for slow connections, which packages web pages, makes the browser up to eight times faster than rival browsers in low connection speeds.

"We have worked a lot on Opera Turbo technology and have also made major improvements on the overall product stability. This is the most stable Opera browser yet," the company said.

The companies usually release several successive test versions of their browsers so they can incorporate user feedback in a series of improvements before their final launch. Microsoft launched its latest IE8 browser in March after a year of public beta testing.

Opera unveiled a public test version of the browser on June 3.

Microsoft's Internet Explorer is used for about 60 percent of global Internet traffic, and Mozilla's Firefox has about 30 percent, with usage of Opera, Google and Apple all around 3 percent each, according to Web analytics firm StatCounter.

Opera has a small share of the global desktop browser market, but its

browser is the most popular in countries like Russia or Ukraine, and its mobile browser is the most widely used browser on handsets.

Gmail Outage Caused by Overloaded Servers

A worldwide outage of Google's Gmail online e-mail system on Tuesday was caused by a traffic jam on its servers, according to Google's official Gmail blog.

The problem was that some recent changes designed to improve traffic flow on request routers, servers designed to direct Web queries to the appropriate Gmail server, overloaded the system after workers took some Gmail servers offline to perform routine upgrades.

"As we now know, we had slightly underestimated the load which some recent changes placed on the request routers," Ben Treynor, site reliability Czar wrote on the Gmail blog. "At about 12:30 p.m. Pacific a few of the request routers became overloaded and in effect told the rest of the system "stop sending us traffic, we're too slow!". This transferred the load onto the remaining request routers, causing a few more of them also to become overloaded, and within minutes nearly all of the request routers were overloaded."

The overload resulted in people around the world being unable to access Gmail for about 100 minutes, Treynor said, though he noted that IMAP/POP access and mail processing continued to work normally.

Gmail engineers were alerted to the problem within seconds of the failures and after figuring out what the problem was, brought additional request routers online. Now, Gmail is more than 99.9 percent available to users, he said.

"We've turned our full attention to helping ensure this kind of event doesn't happen again," he wrote.

One fix the company plans to make is to ensure request routers will work better by having them slow down when overloaded instead of refusing to accept traffic. Treynor said the request routers need to have sufficient failure isolation so that a problem in one data center doesn't affect servers in another data center.

The company will work over the next few weeks to make these changes and further improve reliability, he said.

As Internet Turns 40, Barriers Threaten Its Growth

Goofy videos weren't on the minds of Len Kleinrock and his team at UCLA when they began tests 40 years ago on what would become the Internet. Neither was social networking, for that matter, nor were most of the other easy-to-use applications that have drawn more than a billion people online.

Instead the researchers sought to create an open network for freely exchanging information, an openness that ultimately spurred the

innovation that would later spawn the likes of YouTube, Facebook and the World Wide Web.

There's still plenty of room for innovation today, yet the openness fostering it may be eroding. While the Internet is more widely available and faster than ever, artificial barriers threaten to constrict its growth.

Call it a mid-life crisis.

A variety of factors are to blame. Spam and hacking attacks force network operators to erect security firewalls. Authoritarian regimes block access to many sites and services within their borders. And commercial considerations spur policies that can thwart rivals, particularly on mobile devices like the iPhone.

"There is more freedom for the typical Internet user to play, to communicate, to shop - more opportunities than ever before," said Jonathan Zittrain, a law professor and co-founder of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. "On the worrisome side, there are some longer-term trends that are making it much more possible (for information) to be controlled."

Few were paying attention back on Sept. 2, 1969, when about 20 people gathered in Kleinrock's lab at the University of California, Los Angeles, to watch as two bulky computers passed meaningless test data through a 15-foot gray cable.

That was the beginning of the fledgling Arpanet network. Stanford Research Institute joined a month later, and UC Santa Barbara and the University of Utah did by year's end.

The 1970s brought e-mail and the TCP/IP communications protocols, which allowed multiple networks to connect - and formed the Internet. The '80s gave birth to an addressing system with suffixes like ".com" and ".org" in widespread use today.

The Internet didn't become a household word until the '90s, though, after a British physicist, Tim Berners-Lee, invented the Web, a subset of the Internet that makes it easier to link resources across disparate locations. Meanwhile, service providers like America Online connected millions of people for the first time.

That early obscurity helped the Internet blossom, free from regulatory and commercial constraints that might discourage or even prohibit experimentation.

"For most of the Internet's history, no one had heard of it," Zittrain said. "That gave it time to prove itself functionally and to kind of take root."

Even the U.S. government, which funded much of the Internet's early development as a military project, largely left it alone, allowing its engineers to promote their ideal of an open network.

When Berners-Lee, working at a European physics lab, invented the Web in 1990, he could release it to the world without having to seek permission or contend with security firewalls that today treat unknown types of Internet traffic as suspect.

Even the free flow of pornography led to innovations in Internet credit

card payments, online video and other technologies used in the mainstream today.

"Allow that open access, and a thousand flowers bloom," said Kleinrock, a UCLA professor since 1963. "One thing about the Internet you can predict is you will be surprised by applications you did not expect."

That idealism is eroding.

An ongoing dispute between Google Inc. and Apple Inc. underscores one such barrier.

Like some other mobile devices that connect to the Internet, the iPhone restricts the software that can run on it. Only applications Apple has vetted are allowed.

Apple recently blocked the Google Voice communications application, saying it overrides the iPhone's built-in interface. Skeptics, however, suggest the move thwarts Google's potentially competing phone services.

On desktop computers, some Internet access providers have erected barriers to curb bandwidth-gobbling file-sharing services used by their subscribers. Comcast Corp. got rebuked by Federal Communications Commission last year for blocking or delaying some forms of file-sharing; Comcast ultimately agreed to stop that.

The episode galvanized calls for the government to require "net neutrality," which essentially means that a service provider could not favor certain forms of data traffic over others. But that wouldn't be a new rule as much as a return to the principles that drove the network Kleinrock and his colleagues began building 40 years ago.

Even if service providers don't actively interfere with traffic, they can discourage consumers' unfettered use of the Internet with caps on monthly data usage. Some access providers are testing drastically lower limits that could mean extra charges for watching just a few DVD-quality movies online.

"You are less likely to try things out," said Vint Cerf, Google's chief Internet evangelist and one of the Internet's founding fathers. "No one wants a surprise bill at the end of the month."

Dave Farber, a former chief technologist at the Federal Communications Commission, said systems are far more powerful when software developers and consumers alike can simply try things out.

Farber has unlocked an older iPhone using a warrantee-voiding technique known as jail-breaking, allowing the phone to run software that Apple hasn't approved. By doing that, he could watch video before Apple supported it in the most recent version of the iPhone, and he changed the screen display when the phone is idle to give him a summary of appointments and e-mails.

While Apple insists its reviews are necessary to protect children and consumer privacy and to avoid degrading phone performance, other phone developers are trying to preserve the type of openness found on desktop computers. Google's Android system, for instance, allows anyone to write and distribute software without permission.

Yet even on the desktop, other barriers get in the way.

Steve Crocker, an Internet pioneer who now heads the startup Shinkuro Inc., said his company has had a tough time building technology that helps people in different companies collaborate because of security firewalls that are ubiquitous on the Internet. Simply put, firewalls are designed to block incoming connections, making direct interactions between users challenging, if not impossible.

No one's suggesting the removal of all barriers, of course. Security firewalls and spam filters became crucial as the Internet grew and attracted malicious behavior, much as traffic lights eventually had to be erected as cars flooded the roads. Removing those barriers could create larger problems.

And many barriers throughout history eventually fell away - often under pressure. Early on, AOL was notorious for discouraging users from venturing from its gated community onto the broader Web. The company gradually opened the doors as its subscribers complained or fled. Today, the company is rebuilding its business around that open Internet.

What the Internet's leading engineers are trying to avoid are barriers that are so burdensome that they squash emerging ideas before they can take hold.

Already, there is evidence of controls at workplaces and service providers slowing the uptake of file-sharing and collaboration tools. Video could be next if consumers shun higher-quality and longer clips for fear of incurring extra bandwidth fees. Likewise, startups may never get a chance to reach users if mobile gatekeepers won't allow them.

If such barriers keep innovations from the hands of consumers, we may never know what else we may be missing along the way.

                    Study Finds Prime Time on The Internet Is 11 p.m.

It's 11 p.m. Do you know where your neighbors are?

Chances are they're online. According to a study, North Americans have been staying up late to do their Internet surfing this summer, so late that the peak usage for the whole day has been at 11 p.m. Eastern time.

That appears to be a shift from previous years, when most Internet activity was in the daytime.

The new study by Chelmsford, Mass.-based Internet security firm Arbor Networks found that people using the Internet at work and school produce a smaller traffic peak around 4 p.m. Eastern time on weekdays.

Internet activity then declines as people head home. At 8 p.m. Eastern, U.S. and Canadian home Internet traffic starts spiking, and stays surprisingly strong past midnight, Arbor found. At 2 a.m. Eastern, overall traffic is as high as it is at 9 a.m., when people are logging in at work.

Of course, 11 p.m. Eastern time is just 8 p.m. on the West Coast. But the Eastern and Central time zones account for three-quarters of the U.S. population, so it's clear there's lot of late-night traffic.

It also seems North Americans are staying up much later on the Internet than Europeans. Their traffic peaks when it's 9 p.m. in Western and Central Europe, and then drops sharply.

So what is it that keeps us up at night?

Internet video, including both YouTube and pornography, appears to be a big part of the answer, according to Arbor's Craig Labovitz. Video usage peaks at midnight Eastern, later than any other traffic.

Gaming is another big evening activity, but one that's most intense between 8 p.m. and 11 p.m. Eastern, coinciding with TV's prime time for most Americans. Labovitz found a jump in gaming traffic at exactly 8 p.m. Eastern, and speculates that it's caused by "World of Warcraft" players who prearrange to get together at that time to tackle virtual monsters.

Arbor gathers data from Internet service providers that account for about half of North American traffic. The study looked at 10 weekdays in July. Labovitz said there was a chance that children on summer vacation could be affecting the numbers, and plans to keep watching traffic patterns in different seasons.

Got A Dream But No Cash? The Internet Can Help

Chris Waddell wants to climb Kilimanjaro in a wheelchair; George Del Barrio wants to make a film in Cambodia; Jeff Edwards wants to write a book about a science fiction writer: they want you to fund their dreams.

A website called Kickstarter.com is making it possible for people like this to raise sums ranging from a few hundred to tens of thousands of dollars to fund anything that captures the imagination of Internet users with a little money to spare.

It worked for Emily Richmond, a 24-year-old living in Los Angeles who plans to sail solo around the world for two years.

She has raised $8,142 from 148 people who will receive rewards such as Polaroid photos from the trip, an origami sailboat or a telephone call when she crosses the equator.

Landon Ray, who runs a marketing software firm called SendPepper.com, gave $500 after showing his 5-year-old daughter Richmond's video promising to keep donors updated by blog and send rewards such as a coconut mailed from a far-flung port.

"I thought this was a perfect learning experience for my daughter," Ray said, adding that he also dreamed of sailing the world himself, so it was partly about living vicariously.

Ray also plans to use his sponsorship as a marketing tool.

Many of the projects on the site are by filmmakers, musicians, artists and writers. Project creators set a time limit and a target. If they don't reach it, they get nothing.

Jason Bitner's pitch for $7,500 to pay for post-production of a documentary about the small Midwestern town of La Porte, Indiana, was so popular it raised $12,153.

The film is about an archive of portraits by a photographer who died in 1971. Bitner came across boxes of the pictures in the back room of a diner and has published a book. The film features interviews with the subjects 40 or 50 years later.

"This film is very much about community," Bitner said. "We decided early on we wanted to do community-based funding, sort of crowd-sourced things."

About a third of his 149 backers were friends and family. Others include residents of La Porte but also people from as far afield as Denmark and Australia.

Jonathan Scott Chinn, who is seeking $16,500 to make a short comedy-horror film called "Always a Bridesmaid," said the site was an efficient "creative marketplace."

"You're given the opportunity to make your pitch, and if it's really interesting, it will take off," Chinn said.

Independent singer-songwriter Brad Skistimas, 26, has been using the Internet for eight years to promote his one-man band Five Times August. He used Kickstarter to raise $20,000 to finance his new album "Life As A Song," due out October 13.

Donations amounted to pre-orders of the album, giving fans early access as well as additional material such as handwritten lyrics, photos and, for $1,000, dinner with the singer.

"It's a great way to get involved with fans," Skistimas said. "I was marketing to my own fans, so I said 'If you guys want more music from me, now's a great time to help me out.'"

Kickstarter co-founder Perry Chen said around $500,000 had been donated in the four months since it was launched, with more than 60 percent of projects achieving their goal. Until now the site has charged no fee, but from mid-September it will charge 5 percent of funds donated to successful projects.

Chen said so far there had been no scams that he knows of, though plenty of projects simply don't take off.

"The model works really well to prevent any type of misbehavior because the people who fund these projects; there's always a core group of the person's social network," he said. "Those are bridges people will work very hard not to burn."

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